

THE SAN FRANCISCO STYLE

Lu Watters' Yerba Buena Jazz Band

VOL. I: DAWN CLUB FAVORITES

GOOD TIME JAZZ®
12001



LU WATTERS' YERBA BUENA JAZZ BAND

LU WATTERS & BOB SCOBAY, *trumpets*; TURK MURPHY, *trombone*;
BOB HELM, *clarinet*; WALLY ROSE, *piano*; HARRY MORDECAI, *banjo*;
DICK LAMMI, *bass*; BILL DART, *drums*.

THE SAN FRANCISCO STYLE, PART I

Lu Watters is one of the most original and gifted figures in recent jazz history and, as much as any single individual, responsible for the world-wide revival of classic jazz during the 1940s. Watters and his associates of the San Francisco Bay Area in the late '30s took a second look at the origins of jazz and spearheaded an international movement which brought the traditional New Orleans style back to popularity. Because of the force of his personality, and the personalities of his associates, the revival had a distinct character, which we know today as "the San Francisco style".

To understand what happened in San Francisco in the late '30s and the early '40s, some perspective is necessary. The New Orleans style, which had developed in the early decades of the century, and flowered in the early '20s with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band in Chicago and Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers in New York, was dead. Forgotten, ignored, or dismissed as "corny" was the ensemble style, the contrapuntal weaving of improvised melodic lines by clarinet, trumpet and trombone, with the ensemble a setting for occasional solo breaks and choruses. Forgotten was King Oliver, a broken man, living on hope in Savannah, Georgia, unable to relieve his high blood pressure because he couldn't earn enough as a janitor in a pool room to pay \$3 a treatment. All but forgotten except by a few jazz collectors and folk music specialists was Jelly Roll Morton, struggling to make a new start in Los Angeles, after having transcribed his memories for the Library of Congress in Washington. Forgotten was Bunk Johnson, driving a truck in the rice fields of New Iberia. Forgotten was Kid Ory, working in a Los Angeles postoffice.

Of the New Orleans contingent, only Louis Armstrong was at the top, not for the jazz of which he was a master, but as a great popular entertainer who could sing or play with anything from a swing band to a Hawaiian group and make you love him. In the ascendent were the stars of Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller. They had the glittering successes, the adulation of the kids, the bookings in the nation's leading theaters and hotels, the commercial radio shows and the major label recording contracts.

It was against this background that the San Francisco style developed, a revolt against the extremes of arranged big swing bands with solos as superimposed decoration, and the formless series of solos without arrangement which characterized small band jazz. Watters and his associates were ready for a kind of music which would give them more freedom than they had in the swing bands and, at the same time, integrate their individual talents in an organized group. To do this, they returned to the basic principle of the original jazz groups from New Orleans—collective improvisation with freely moving lines blending in an ensemble sound. While they were inspired by the work of Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, and others, they were by no means imitators or literal recreators of the past.

In the process of learning and playing early rags, stomps and blues, the San Francisco musicians, for the first time in the history of jazz, revitalized and preserved the old jazz repertoire by performing and writing it down. Formerly bands played, musicians improvised, jazz evolved, and the early forms passed into neglect. Much of this was due to the spontaneous creation of the material. With the exception of ragtime which was composed and published in piano copies, very little of early jazz was written. In many cases nothing existed but a lead sheet jotted down for copyright purposes. Fortunately, however, the phonograph preserved many of the jazz performances from the time of the 1st World War through the '20s, and the phonograph record proved to be the key in bringing the New Orleans ensemble style to international prominence a quarter of a century after its heyday. It is no accident that Lu Watters and the men around him were jazz record collectors.

During the middle '30s, Watters, after many years as a professional musician in the commercial bands, knew that kind of music was not for him. In 1937, back in San Francisco from travels around the United States and to the Orient, he organized his first jazz band, a five-piece group with Forrest Browne on piano, and opened at The Ambassador Ballroom on Fillmore Street. In the same year, Turk Murphy, the trombonist, and Bob Helm, the clarinetist, came back to the Bay Area after jobs on the road with commercial bands. They, like Watters, wanted to play jazz, and formed a group of their own with Byron Berry on trumpet, Rex Kelly, *guitar*, and Bill Dart, *drums*. This band played a few odd jobs around town but nothing much happened, the band broke up, and the men found other ways to make a living. Turk worked as a mechanic in an Oakland garage.

These records were made by Lu Watters on six successive Mondays in May and early June 1946. To get a "dance hall sound", Watters used the Avalon Ballroom on Post Street off Van Ness in San Francisco. Two mikes were set in front of the band, which was on the stage. One mike, on a boom, was set a dozen feet in front of Watters. The other mike was set near the piano. The sound was carried via leased telephone wire to the recording studio, several blocks away, where direct disc masters were cut. In transferring the originals to tape, and then to long playing records, GTJ used latest audio techniques to reduce distortion as much as possible, improve the balance of the ensemble and the presence of the soloists. The musical and historical value of the performances, however, justify any technical flaws which remain.

Even so, the experience of playing together taught them a great deal. As a result of the association with Helm, with whom he listened to Louis Armstrong's Hot Five records, Turk became an admirer of Kid Ory's trombone style, and Helm of the clarinet playing of Johnny Dodds. They were still a long way from an understanding of the intricate polyphony of the New Orleans style, but were moving rapidly in that direction.

As Helm recalls, "The Music Hall, sanctuary, conservatory and experimental laboratory at that time was a place name of Big Bear Tavern. Most of the Bay Area jazz musicians came up to this obscure place to blow away those commerciality blues." The jam-session has always been an important extra-curricular activity for jazz musicians who met after their various commercial jobs, exchanged ideas, and often played until dawn. At that time the tunes used in most jam-sessions around the country were the standards *Tea for Two*, *Lady Be Good*, *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Jazz Me Blues*, and the blues. The sessions at the Big Bear were quite different. The tunes were *High Society*, *Panama*, *Maple Leaf Rag*, with all the strains. The voyages of discovery had started.

At these sessions Watters was the dominant figure, and his reputation was that of the best jazz musician in the area. Getting together, playing, listening to records, Watters showed the S. F. jazz musicians there was another kind of jazz that went back prior to the swing style, prior to the Chicago musicians and Bix, prior to Louis Armstrong's Hot Five. They discovered New Orleans.

In January 1938, the pianist Paul Lingle formed a jazz band with Al Zohn, *cornet*, Turk, Helm, Rex Kelly, *banjo*, and Gordon Edwards, *drums*. This band stayed together off and on for a few months. Shortly after that, Watters decided to form a big band, two trumpets, two trombones, three reeds and four rhythm for a steady job at Sweets Ballroom in Oakland. The formation of this band was a most significant development in the San Francisco style. For the first time, the various jazz musicians in the area had an opportunity to play together in an organized group. The personnel included: Bob Scobey, *trumpet*; Hy Gates, *trombone*; Bob Helm, *clarinet*; Dave Olson, *piano*; Russ Bennett or Clancy Hayes, *banjo*; Squire Girsback, *bass*; Gordon Edwards, *drums*. Watters realized that no jazz band could hold a job in 1938 without a varied repertoire, pop tunes and ballads of the day, waltzes, rumbas and tangos. Watters knew he wouldn't last long by substituting the traditional old jazz tunes for the current favorites. Nevertheless, fifty per cent of their tunes were jazz and the current favorites were played only when a particularly belligerent request was made by the management or a customer. To everyone's astonishment, the musical experiment was a success, the gate receipts were increased, and the audience danced happily to music which it had never heard before. Still, prejudice dies hard. As Helm recalls, "The owners of the ballroom would invariably come up on the bandstand on a jam-packed Saturday night, when the band had just finished a particularly rousing number, and plead for a soft polite waltz. The excuse was that the dancers were getting too excited, and would start to brawl. The band kept playing the way they wanted, the dancers kept dancing, and there were no brawls."

Let Helm tell the story of how they lost that job. "We almost had a home except for a profoundly exuberant rehearsal and test record session one Sunday afternoon. The good mash was broken out and soon we had a contest going on in descriptive fantasies about people, places and events interspersed with stories of a less printable nature.

All the mikes on the band stand were being used in the empty ballroom, but, it seems there was a loudspeaker in the office which blasted away and, the office was occupied. Whoever was tuned in on these fanciful allegories was certainly not properly appreciative; they never even said goodbye when the band left two weeks later."

That was the Fall of 1939. In spite of the success he'd had playing jazz with the big band, Lu realized the answer for him lay in the area of small band jazz, and early in 1940 formed a small group including Paul Lingle, *piano*; Helm, Murphy, Pat Patton, *banjo*; and Squire Girsback, *bass*. This band never played a job, but the rehearsals held atop the Mark Twain Hotel were important in welding the musicians into a unified ensemble. At this time, too, Watters decided he wanted the drive and power two cornets would give the band and, via the early King Oliver records, introduced the men to the two-cornet sound which was to be so characteristic of the Yerba Buena band to come. In the Summer of 1940, Watters reorganized his small rehearsal band with himself and Byron Berry, *cornets*; Turk, *trombone*; Helm, *clarinet*; Forrest Browne, *piano*; Benny Johnson, *banjo*; Dick Lammi, *bass*; and Gordon Edwards, *drums*. Forrest Browne was an admirer of Jelly Roll Morton, and introduced many of the Morton works to the band's arsenal of early jazz tunes.

Later that summer, Berry, Edwards and Johnson left the band to be replaced by Bob Scobey, Bill Dart and Clancy Hayes. It was at that time the Hot Jazz Society arranged several sessions at the Dawn Club on Annie Street, an alley just behind the Palace Hotel, off Market, San Francisco's main street. The Watters group proved to be an immediate sensation. The occasional sessions led to a one night a week schedule, and their popularity grew until within a few months the YBJB was playing four nights a week: pure ensemble jazz, cakewalks, ragtime and blues.

CONTINUED IN VOL. 2, GTJ 12002

SIDE 1: DAWN CLUB FAVORITES

MINSTRELS OF ANNIE STREET by Turk Murphy. The title is a result of one of the first newspaper articles about the YBJB which referred to them as the Minstrels of Annie Street, the address of The Dawn Club.

JAZZIN' BABIES BLUES by Richard M. Jones. The YBJB enjoyed playing the works of Richard M. Jones, and Jazzin' Babies became a Dawn Club favorite. The wartime version of the YBJB with Benny Strickler also played it (GTJ Extended Play 1001).

THE EASY WINNERS by Scott Joplin was written in 1901. Watters liked this and called it "the Klondike special". It had the sound of the saloons of the early mining days to him.

OSTRICH WALK by D. J. La Rocca & Larry Shields, was made famous by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1917.

PINEAPPLE RAG by Scott Joplin was composed in 1908, and was one of the first Joplin rags Wally learned.

I'M GOIN' HUNTIN' by Waller & Johnson. A little known tune which Watters liked.

SIDE 2: DAWN CLUB FAVORITES

I AIN'T GONNA GIVE NOBODY NONE O' THIS JELLY ROLL by Spencer Williams and Clarence Williams dates from 1919 and was a favorite of the band. The present recording is one of the few in which the verse is played.

NEW ORLEANS BLUES, also known as New Orleans Joys, features Wally Rose with the band. It is one of Jelly Roll Morton's earlier compositions.

ORIGINAL RAGS by Scott Joplin was one of his first rags, written in 1899.

ORY'S CREOLE TROMBONE by Kid Ory. This favorite trombone showpiece has also been recorded by Turk with Bunk Johnson (GTJ 12024), and with his own band (GTJ 12026). It was recorded three times by Ory: in 1921 with his own band, in 1927 with Louis Armstrong's Hot Five, and again in 1945 with his own band (GTJ 12022).

PASTIME RAG NO. 5 by Artie Matthews. This is one of a series of five Pastime Rags by the composer of Weary Blues. They are favorites of the San Francisco school, and Paul Lingle has recorded No. 3 (GTJ 12025).

CANAL STREET BLUES was written by King Oliver and recorded by him in 1923.

By LESTER KOENIG (1954)

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GOOD TIME JAZZ
Trade Mark Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

MINSTRELS OF
ANNIE STREET
by Turk Murphy
JAZZIN' BABIES BLUES
by Richard H. Jones
THE EASY WINNERS
by Scott Aspin
OSTRICH WALK
by D. J. La Rosa & Larry Shulds
PINEAPPLE RAG
by Scott Aspin
I'M GOIN' HUNTIN'
by Walter & Johnson

SET A
L-12001
(LKL 12-01)

Side 1
DAWN CLUB
FAVORITES

LU WATTERS'
YERBA BUENA JAZZ BAND

LU WATTERS & BOB SCOBEE, *trumpets*;
TURK MURPHY, *trombone*; BOB HELM, *clarinet*;
WALLY ROSE, *piano*; HARRY MORDECAI, *banjo*;
DICK LAMMI, *bass*; BILL DART, *drums*

LONG PLAYING MICROGROOVE
GOOD TIME JAZZ RECORD CO., INC., LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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AIN'T CONNA
GIVE NOBODY
NONE OF MY JELLY ROLL
by Spencer & Clarence Williams
NEW ORLEANS JOYS
by Jelly Roll Morton
ORIGINAL RAGS
by Scott Joplin
DRY'S CREOLE TROMBONE
by Kid Ory
PASTIME RAG NO. 5
by Artie Matthews
CANAL STREET BLUES
by King Oliver

SET A
L-12001
(LKL 12-02)

Side 2
DAWN CLUB
FAVORITES

LU WATTERS'
YERBA BUENA JAZZ BAND

LU WATTERS & BOB SCOBEE, *trumpets*;
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